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Asbestos study caught Quebec by surprise

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Recent findings on health hazards faced by asbestos workers caught Quebec's natural resources department by surprise, says a highly placed department source.

A two-year study, conducted by a Mount Sinai Medical School team and released March 3, found that 61 per cent of 1,200 asbestos workers in Thetford Mines with more than 20 years' experience have developed lung abnormalities. Fifty-two per cent were found to have asbestosis, a sometimes fatal disease caused by the inhalation of asbestos fibres.

Last week, a brief announcement from Resources Minister Gilles Masse's office said orders would be issued for stricter enforcement of existing regulations on asbestos fibre air pollution in plants.

The announcement also said a law would be drafted to provide stiffer fines for offending companies.

The department source told THE MONTREAL STAR: "Although we had been inspecting these sites (asbestos mines and mills) on a fairly regular basis, we hadn't perhaps placed as much emphasis on the matter as we should have."

He added that the department is responsible for safety inspections at 850 mining operations across the province and only has 10 inspectors to do the job.

"It would take two months to take proper air samples in one large mill operated by the Asbestos Corp. in Thetford Mines. So you can see the enormity of our task."

Safety has been a major issue in contract talks between the asbestos companies and workers, who went on strike early yesterday.

"We don't dare talk because we could be accused of supporting either one of the two parties," the resources department official said prior to the strike. "So we're gathering all the facts and we'll draft new legislation based on our findings.

"There's little doubt, however, that the Mount Sinai report is emerging as a strong bargaining point in favor of the unions," he said.

Quebec has traditionally based asbestos mill inspections on U.S. stand-

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Quebec to take tougher asbestos stand

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ards. Offenders could be prosecuted under Quebec Mining Act regulations, but the department official could not recall the last time a firm was prosecuted.

"Up until last summer, the acceptable level was five million dust particles per cubic foot of air," he said. "Now, the new norm is five fibres of five microns per cubic centimetre of air."

Quebec has not fully adopted the new norm in its inspections because of problems with fibre pollution counts.

Dr. J. Corbett MacDonald, of McGill University's department of epidemiology and health, said:

"There is a definite problem ... but it is not because scientists can't measure the number of fibres in a cubic centimetre of air.

"The difficulty is in obtaining repeatable answers when you measure fibres. Answers are more repeatable when you measure dust particles."

Inspectors' findings are based on over-all readings. In some parts of a mill or mine dust levels may be fairly constant, but asbestos fibre pollution can vary greatly from one phase of the operation to another.

When asbestos-bearing rock—the best of which is only seven per cent asbestos—is mined, there may be a high concentration of dust but a low fibre pollution level.

In the refining process, dust levels may remain fairly constant but fibre pollution may increase greatly, reaching a peak when the asbestos is bagged.

"This makes it hard to measure fibres because their numbers vary from one operation to another and from one floor of a mill to the next," said MacDonald.

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Danger

He said the five-micron size is used in the standards because it is believed to be the most dangerous size.

"Our findings so far indicate that large and small fibres are less harmful than middle-sized ones measuring five microns. The larger fibres are too big to penetrate the lung tissue, while the very small ones have less kick and are thus less harmful."

The resources department official said Quebec feels the U.S. standard of five fibres per cubic centimetre is adequate because of the limited refining done here. Most of our asbestos is exported for processing and it is in the processing stages that dangerous five-micron fibres are most prevalent.

England, he said, processes asbestos into textiles and it adheres to a standard of only two fibres of five microns per cubic centimetre, because of workers' constant contact with fibres of this size.

"In Quebec we're also caught between wanting to enforce the kind of standards they have in England and trying to be realistic so that we don't force the closure of our mills.

"The industry has told us that if we want to enforce two fibres, they'll have to shut down their mills which would have to be practically torn down to accommodate proper air purifiers.

"They've agreed, however, to install the latest equipment in any new plants they build.

"In the past we felt that the law shouldn't be too stiff or else we would have discouraged companies from opening new asbestos processing mills here."

He added that the planned legislation will give companies a period of five years to reduce asbestos fibre pollution to the legal minimum.

"The U.S. has tough laws which are forcing companies to close plants and reopen them in Mexico and Taiwan. There were only two such plants in Mexico in 1970 and now there are 25."

Masks

An immediate solution to the problem, he said, would be for workers to wear masks "but the guys don't like masks because they're uncomfortable."

The companies tried for years to make the workers wear masks "but they ended up wearing them around their necks," the official said.

"The government wouldn't like to have to force them by law to wear masks but it's possible we may have to do it if we find that there's little chance in the short term of cleaning up their environment because of the heavy costs involved."

The official said tests carried out by the resources department in Thetford Mines in recent months showed readings of 5.5 to six fibres per cubic centimetre of air.

"This is a far cry from the 50 to 60 fibres the unions have been claiming. But our readings were averages of air samples taken at various spots in the mills—not just readings obtained, for example, directly over bags being filled under pressure with asbestos."

While the department has tried in the past to enforce U.S. standards of five million dust particles per cubic foot, he said, the enforcement in some cases may have been lax because of the companies' stand that they would have to close down their mills if the government made it tougher on them.

"But in the light of these latest findings, we'll have to stiffen our laws and enforce them more rigorously. We'll also have to hire more inspectors and those ridiculous fines of $25 a day will have to be beefed up considerably."

Despite recent union concern about air pollution in Thetford Mines plants, he said, "there remains the undisputable fact that they couldn't have considered the situation all that bad because since 1968 they only lodged two official complaints with our department."

Another government body currently taking a closer look at the province's asbestos mills is Dr. Victor Goldbloom's environment department.

In a recent interview, Goldbloom said the Mount Sinai report "makes the problem appear more serious than we were previously led to believe."

"When I first became minister of the environment, (in 1970), it wasn't certain whether I would be responsible for this area of jurisdiction so I went to the asbestos producing area anyway and I met the medical people hired by the companies.

"They assured me that there had been a reduction in the frequency of the main diseases attributed to asbestos. Each decade had shown improvements and I'm sure there is some truth to this but at the same time it is now evident that one of the critical factors in diseases related to asbestos is the length of exposure.

"The Sinai report shows that the measures taken by the company clinic delayed the phenomenon but it is still occurring after long exposure. And this shows we haven't yet learned how to protect the workers completely."

Goldbloom added that earlier complaints of dangerous asbestos fibre levels in the drinking water of Thetford Mines proved unfounded following tests by his department.

"This was a bit of a scare but early evaluations show that there is no higher incidence of stomach cancer which would have been the case had the water contained high levels of asbestos."

He added that his department is sending special teams to study the quality of the air in the asbestos plants in co-operation with experts from the resources department.

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